[The Renns]

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THE RENNS

Wesley Renn lives in the mill village in one of the better houses which has a comfortable stretch of lawn shaded by two or three trees. He likes to sit in his swing on the porch in the springtime and watch day by day as the tree buds grow into leaves and the grass shoots up into a newer, pleasanter green. His first twenty-one years were spent in the country and the sight of growing things still awakens in him an urge to live again on the farm. He says that he will probably die in a mill village but at heart he'll always be a farmer.

The farm was sparing in the things which it gave to Wesley Renn. His father was a renter with nine children and he was never able to do the things he wanted to do for his children. To Wesley he gave four sessions of school: the first, one and one-half months for which the teacher was paid a dollar a month; the second, two months at the same price; the third and fourth, two months each year in a free school.

The elder Renn was not without ambition for his children. He cherished the hope that each of his five sons might one day own some of the acres which they had helped him cultivate. Long years of labor had taught 2 him that if they did fulfill this hope the money with which they bought the land would not be made on the other man's land. When in 1899 cotton went to four cents after what had been en extremely unfavorable growing season in his

vicinity, Mr. Renn, the elder, decided definitely that he would take his family from the farm into town where they might get work in a cotton mill.

At that time Wesley Renn was the oldest child at home. The three older boys had married and one was still a tenant farmer and two had found work in cotton mills. Wesley loved the country and was unwilling to leave it. In a few months after fall harvest he would be twenty-one, and, as he expresses it, his own free man. Thereafter, he would be no longer answerable to his father for his wage, and he could work where he chose. In an effort to keep his father on the farm Wesley offered to give him another year's work but the elder Renn was firmly convinced that farming for the other fellow had more drawbacks than advantages.

The Renns were living on one of the many farms belonging to David Ritchie. The quantity of cotton produced for Ritchie by his tenants was such that he needed a gin to take care of his own crops. In the 3 fall of 1899 he was without a gin operator and he offered the job to Wesley who had proven himself a good steady worker and a man who got along with Negroes. Wesley says, “That offer come like a shining light because I'd never before had such a chance to make so much cash money in so short a time.” His father's elation at his success almost matched his own. When Mr. Ritchie came to the field where the Renns were picking cotton and made his offer, the elder Renn turned to his son and said, “You don't have to stop and think fer a minute, Wesley. Me and the children'll double up on the hours and get the cotton out without your help and you can have as your own all you make.” So for three months before taking a job in the cotton mill Wesley Renn operated his landlord's cotton gin at eleven dollars a month.

The Renns moved into Henderson but they did not go into a mill house. The elder Renn, who had lived in poor and unattractive houses all his life, still had a kind of pride which made him strive to keep his family from being classified as “cotton mill people.” He found a small house on an out-of-the-way street and from there his children went into the mill. Mr.

Renn had some ability as a carpenter and secured a job with a contractor at seventy-five cents a day.

4

With money from his job as gin operator still in his pockets, Wesley Renn was enabled to make a choice of the kind of mill work he wished to do. Instead of immediately taking a low wage job, he entered the weave room and worked there for four weeks learning his trade without receiving any pay. During the next four weeks he ran two looms at sixty cents a day. He increased his capacity to four looms for which he received one dollar and twenty cents a day. He continued in the weave room until 1902 when it closed down. Wesley was then transferred to another department of the mill, but his work-load there was so heavy he found it impossible to keep up.

He left Henderson and went to a small rural cotton mill at Falls. There he stayed for seven years and there at the age of twenty-five he married Sadie Jones. Sadie was inclined toward frailness. Her father, a tenant farmer, died when Sadie was twelve years old, leaving his wife with four small girls of whom Sadie was the oldest. Unable to eke out a living on the farm Mrs. Jones moved with her children to the mill.

Wesley now frequently refers to the insanitary conditions of the mills in the period when Sadie first entered them. “It's hard to believe,” he says, “but in them days along about Christmas time the yard men 5 would come in the mill with their shovels and actually scrape up piles of filth where the help had spit all the year long and no attention at all being paid to it. Yessir, plenty of cotton mill folks had T B's in them days and no wonder.” He may then look at Sadie who sometimes sits on the porch with him while he is waiting for the mill whistle to summon him to work. He wants her to join him in support of the statement he has just made, and in a tired sort of way she nods her head in agreement.

Sadie has never worked in the mill since her marriage but she has borne eight children. After the birth of her second child her health became worse, and since then there have been very few months when she has not received medical treatment.

At Falls Mills Wesley became a loom fixer and such a proficient one that the Rosemary mills offered him a little higher wage — an offer which he immediately took. While he was at Falls, his mother-in-law had died and her three unmarried daughters had moved in with him and his family. Wesley did well with his new job but his three sisters-in-law were unable to do the Jack Hart weaving, the system then being used at Rosemary. Consequently the family had to move after a short stay of seven weeks and this time they went to East Durham.

6

Wesley moved several more times during the next few years, each time with the expectation of higher wages. He knows now that many of the moves were not wise, but in those days he was grabbing at any chance that promised a little more money. He still had visions of buying a little farm, but at no place had he found an opportunity for laying aside a penny.

Wesley was ambitious also that his younger brother Joe should find an occupation more respectable than mill work. In 1912 he persuaded Joe to go to Atlanta for an eight weeks' barber's course. Joe's life in the mill had started so early that he had even less schooling than Wesley. When he returned from Atlanta he made arrangements with a retired school teacher for lessons in reading, writing, and simple arithmetic. In time he bought a shop of his own and had sufficient knowledge of arithmetic to keep his accounts.

In 1917, without the money he had hoped to have but with a determination to try farming again, Wesley returned to his father's old landlord, and arranged for farming on halves. He broke even in 1917, but the year 1918 brought him more success than he had ever known. The price of tobacco had soared far beyond anything he had ever dreamed of and his

crop had given him a greater yield than he would ordinarily expect in 7 two average years. That year his landlord marketed five thousand dollars worth of tobacco and half of that money was Wesley's. When he got through paying the merchant who had furnished him on the basis of sales price plus twenty percent carrying charge, he still had a neat sum left. As another step toward land ownership he bought mules and farm equipment and made new arrangements with his landlord. This time he would receive three-fourths of what he produced.

That year Mr. Ritchie joined the Tobacco Cooperative and when the tobacco was marketed Wesley was given a check for one-third of the amount coming to him. He says he is still waiting for the balance. The whole amount would have been small because of a great drop in tobacco prices. Wesley sold his stock, paid up his debts, and had enough left to move his family back to the mill. Since then he has accepted what seems to him to be his inevitable lot, that the remainder of his life will be spent at the mill.

Of the eight children three are now married and two are working in the mill. The other three are in school and the Renns hope to see them finish high school. The five oldest children received on the average a sixth grade education.

8

The children are proud of their home, and the two who are working spend a good part of their wages in buying new furniture on the installment plan. They are particularly proud of their living room with its big-flowered rug, its over-stuffed furniture, its many gaudy dolls, and its numerous arrangements of artificial flowers. It is just within the past three years that they have had a living room at all. Across the narrow hall is Sadie's bedroom which is quiet and restful. Her husband and her children have bought for her a good bedroom suite and they have added small comforts which made it a satisfying place for Sadie. She is unable to sit up for more than a few hours at a time and her children gather around in the room as she lies on the bed, each trying in some small way to encourage her into believing that she will soon be well. On such occasions various members of the family sit around

reading books from the village library. The fifteen-year-old boy prefers murder stories with such titles as “The Skull Murder Case” and the eleven year old daughter is still intrigued with the adventures of the Bobbsey Twins. Wesley is obviously well pleased when he sees his children with books in their hands, because to him a love of reading, selective or not, is a mark of 9 respectability. Sadie, too, is likely to add a tired smile when one of her children becomes so absorbed in a book that he pays no attention to some question addressed to him.

Wesley wants Sadie to go to Duke Hospital and stay there for treatment but she has a fear of hospitals which she is unable to overcome. Out of his good wage of twenty-six dollars a week he is saving a sum from each pay day so that he may be able to provide the care which any adverse change in his wife's health might require.